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ABSTRACT

It has previously been shown that an opera can successfully be integrated into a high school or college language class. It is suggested that an entire semester could be devoted to just French operas and French art, using corresponding literary texts for comparative purposes. Grammar points are included as needed; conversation about the stories bring in cultural material about the mores of the period. The operas suggested for a semester class are: "La Voix humaine," "L'Heure espagnole," "Peleas et Melisande," "Louise," "Les Contes d'Hoffman," and "Manon." (Author/VWL)

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OPERA AND ART IN THE FRENCH FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

It has previously been shown that an opera can successfully be integrated into a high school or college language class. It is suggested that an entire semester could be devoted to just French operas and French art, using corresponding literary texts (e.g. *Manon Lescaut* by the abbé Prévost and the short story *Carmen* by Mérimée) for comparative purposes. Grammar points are included as needed; conversation about the stories (especially Louise and *Manon*) bring in cultural material about the mores of the period. The operas suggested for a semester class are: *La Voix humaine* (words by Jean Cocteau/music by Francis Poulenc), *L'Heure espagnole* (Maurice Ravel), *Péléas et Mélisande* (libretto based on play by Maurice Maeterlinck/music by Claude Debussy), *Louise* (Gustave Charpentier), *Les Contes d'Hoffman* (Jacques Offenbach), and *Manon* (Jules Massenet). Videos, which help to make the opera much more vivid, are currently available for *L'Heure espangole*, *Carmen*, *Les Contes d'Hoffman*, and *Manon*.

A class devoted to French culture and civilization usually includes some references to art and music, but seldom can time be devoted entirely to several operas. A class was offered to advanced French students at our small liberal arts college where the entire focus was on art and music, especially on several French operas. The emphasis was on the librettos, which the students followed as they listened to the music being sung. By studying several French operas, the students had a good over-view of the genre. In addition to the operas, the students studied some paintings and listened to some popular music.

Using an occasional popular French song to liven up the classroom is not a new idea. Delière and Lafayette (1985), Hamblin (1987) and Leith (1979) have all shown that French popular songs can be integrated into the foreign language classroom. Unfortunately, teachers are rather limited by the songs they happen to have collected. Most often, the lyrics don't come with the songs, and it is a tedious task to try to jot down the lyrics as one listens over and over to the same song. The *Champs Elysées* cassette programs[1] simplify matters by printing the lyrics, but those songs are not always easy to understand and are not always pedagogically appropriate.

Learning some grammar can be facilitated through learning a song (e.g. "Un Jour tu verras, on se recontrera" for learning the future tense) or songs can be used to introduce beginners to french (e.g. "Dites-moi pourquoi la vie est belle" from South Pacific). Popular songs are probably most useful when used as reinforcement.

Salvatore Bruno (1989) includes operas in the high school Italian classes. Arthur D. Brady (1980) presents one French opera each year to his advanced (and sometimes intermediate) secondary school students. Vialet (1992) has shown that French operas can be integrated into courses on culture and civilization at the college level, e.g. the rock opera *La Révolution française* by Claude-Michel Schonberg and Raymon Jeannot. Miller (1984) and Lamb (1991) have shown that opera can even be included in an elementary school class. Yet seldom are courses of French opera and French art offered in college foreign language departments as the primary subjects, with literature or grammar used in a subordinate or supporting role. Operas,

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having both lyrics and music, have a certain profound impact on the listener. The students get caught up in the dramatic mood, the emotions of the singers. Beauty, art and relevance all seem to come together.

The libretti for operas are readily available and can be used in a classroom as texts. In fact, one can include some operas this year and different operas another year without having to necessitate the purchase of large text books; libretti are sold separately. Rather than using the operas as adjuncts, operas can be studied as the primary text, and the literature from which the libretto is taken can be used for comparison. Such a class was offered to an advanced French class of college students at Elmhurst College.

Popular music (e.g. by Edith Piaf, Charles Aznavour, Jacques Brel, Nana Mouskouri, Mireille Mathieu, etc.), for which the lyrics were provided, was played at the beginning of each class to start the class. But the major portion of the class was devoted to French operas and French paintings. The cassettes for all the music (and videos for some of the operas) were available in the language lab for the students; each student had a copy of the libretti. Since the French texts for the nineteenth century operas are in the public domain, those can be copied for students.

As an option to the works chronologically, the most modern work could be studied first. For example, *La Voix humaine* by Francis Poulenc (music) and Jean Cocteau (text) was the first opera to which the French class at Elmhurst College was exposed. The words are simple enough, but when put to Poulenc's music, the poignancy of the monologue is striking. There is only one voice, that of a desperate woman talking on the phone to her former lover who obviously is abandoning her. The opera (which lasts less than an hour) can be played in one class period. A take-home, essay-type exam required students to listen carefully to the opera, following the libretto in detail. For example, they had to determine where and why the lady was telling lies, how one knew that the man was not phoning from home, etc.

After the intense, rather draining experience of *La Voix humaine*, the class studied *L'Heure espagnole* by Maurice Ravel. For that opera we had not only cassettes, but a video was available as well.

L'Heure espagnole is a musical comedy. Concepción, the wife of Torquemada (a man who repairs watches and clocks) is left alone on Thursdays while her husband goes to regulate the town's clocks. This is her opportunity to live it up! Ramiro (a muscular customer) is kept busy carrying clocks up and down the stairs, while she entertains a poet and then a banker. Disgusted with the poet (who concentrates too much on composing poetry!) and the banker (whom she really doesn't like), she finally goes upstairs to the bedroom with Ramiro (sans clock!). All ends happily when Torquemada returns home in time to sell clocks to the poet and banker, whom he assumes to be *clientèle*.

The class read the text together for the beginning of the opera until the students understood just what it was about. After listening to the cassette tapes, the students viewed the video. As an evaluation, they had a take-home exam where they had to recount the story from the point of view of Ramiro (*Aujourd'hui je suis allé chez l'horlogier...*). They were to explain the meaning of *cocu* and *coucou* with respect to this story. They had to discover where the music sounded

very Spanish and which elements had an Hispanic quality. Students were obliged to listen (and follow the libretto) several times.

Péléas et Mélisande (music by Claude Débussy, play by Maurice Maeterlinck) was perhaps the most difficult opera, music-wise and story-wise. The opera's libretto is almost word-for-word the same as Maeterlinck's play. Golaud, son of King Arkël, discovers Mélisande in the forest, near a fountain. Knowing little about her, Golaud marries Mélisande and brings her back home. Once back at the castle, Mélisande meets and gradually begins to love Péléas, the half-brother of Golaud. The light and the darkness, water fountains, grottos, all take on symbolic meaning and are represented by orchestral instruments and musical themes.

Golaud has a son from a previous marriage, the little Yniold. When Golaud questions Yniold about the relationship between Péléas and Mélisande ("petite Maman")—and especially when Golaud asks him to climb on his father's shoulders to recount what he sees when he looks through the window at Péléas and Mélisande together—the tension, anxiety and jealousy are all represented by the music, counterbalanced by the child's innocence.

The final scene between Péléas and Mélisande is most dramatic. They finally admit their mutual love and their one and only long passionate kiss is witnessed by Golaud who then kills his half-brother.

There are no arias as such in Débussy's opera. It is a modern opera, filled with symbolism and tension. The music dramatically represents the moods and feelings of the characters. The students had to listen carefully to the opera several times to be able to determine which instruments were used to represent the light, the darkness, the fountains, the jealousy of Golaud. Students had to recount the story, from Golaud's point of view.

After listening to those three rather modern operas, four more traditional 19th century operas were studied. First, the class studied *Carmen* (Georges Bizet), then *Louise* (Gustave Charpentier), followed by *Les Contes d'Hoffman* (Jacques Offenbach), and lastly *Manon* (Jules Massenet, based on *Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* by the abbé Prévost). The students had to read Mérimée's short story Carmen and the abbé Prévost's novel, in order to compare the literary version with the opera. For *Carmen* and *Les Contes d'Hoffman*, the class both heard and saw the video versions. A videos of Massenet's *Manon* exists; the class did not have access to it at that time.

The short story *Carmen* by Mérimée is fairly difficult reading. It requires some explanation of difficult passages in class. The students noted the differences between the short story and the opera version. They became familiar with the recurring musical themes (e.g. the love or fate motif of Carmen, the Toréador melody) through reinforcement by the video. If there is an opera the students might have heard before, it would be Bizet's exotic *Carmen*.

Louise, on the other hand, was not as exotic and actually was about a young girl the same age as the students in class. Louise falls in love with a young artist who lives next door. Her mother categorically refuses to consider the thought of Louise marrying an impoverished artist. Louise's parents are portrayed as simple, hard-working, rather poor but content people, wanting the best for their only daughter.

The father returns home and the music reflects the warm ambiance of a comfortable, loving home where soup is the reward for a hard day's labor. The music reflects the love between father and daughter just as it reflects the hostility between mother and daughter.

In Act II there are wonderful street scenes of nineteenth century Paris. Louise is one of the young girls who sews in an atelier, from which she eventually flees in order to join her beloved Julien. The ambiance of the atelier where she works is as picturesque as a long description in a novel.

Act III is the scene of utter bliss, where Julien and Louise have set up housekeeping at the top of Montmartre. The bliss is eventually interrupted by the arrival of Louise's mother (not very pleasant music!) to announce that Louise's father is very ill and Louise must return home.

Act IV informs us that this was but a ruse to trick Louise into returning home. The final scene is most dramatic, where Louise begins hallucinating and becomes uncontrollable. Finally, her father tells her to get out, to join her lover. Louise hesitates but an instant, then dashes out...and of course, the father realizes, too late, that he has cast out his only child, Louise. Richard Strauss called the very final cries of "Louise! Louise! O Paris!" one of the highpoints in French dramatic music.[2]

The subject of the opera led the class to have long discussions about whether one should marry the person he loves, in spite of disapproval by parents, and whether parents are wrong to try to protect their daughter from marrying someone who does not earn a regular income. The students could empathize with both Louise and the parents. It is to be noted that in those days, a young girl could not get married without the approval of her parents. In that case, the question of interest asked if Julien really wanted to marry Louise, or if he just wanted to "shack-up" with her, knowing her parents would not approve of him?

Although the study of grammar was kept to a minimum, the fate of Louise was a good occasion to discuss certain grammar points. The if/result clauses (if in the present/result in the present or future; if in the imparfait/result in the conditionnel; if in the plusque parfait/result in the conditionnel du passé) were appropriate:

Si Louise obéit à ses parents, ils seront heureux.
Si Louise obéissait à ses parents, ils seraient heureux.
Si Louise leur avait obéi, ils auraient été heureux.

Similarly, this was a good opportunity to discuss the difference between the forms of "to marry" (*marier, se marier* and *épouser).*

Le père voulait marier sa fille avec un bourgeois.
Julien voulait se marier avec Louise.
Julien n'a pas pu épouser Louise.

This was also a good time to remind students that when a sentence begins with *peut-être* the verb should be inverted. They had to be reminded about the different forms of "to leave" (comparing *quitter* which takes a direct object, as opposed to *partir* or *sortir*). And then there is the ever-present problem: "he wants her to"...*il veut qu'elle* + subjunctive.

Students appear to have liked *Les Contes d'Hoffman*; the reason often given was "because it was weird." The video was most helpful in teaching this unit.

The take-home exam gave the students a chance to listen to the opera as often as was needed. They could refer to the libretto, use a dictionary, organize ideas, and write answers in coherent French. They were to indicate where and when in each act did one hear the musical theme which represented Lindorf (or the devil) How many times did one hear the Barcarole theme? Obviously, the intention was for them to listen to the opera several times.

The last opera studied was Massenet's *Manon*. Some time was spent discussing the abbé Prévost novel, comparing it with the opera (but Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* was not mentioned). Tiberge does not exist in the opera *Manon*; Brétigny of the opera is a composite of the men with whom Manon is unfaithful to des Grieux. Money plays a very important role in both novel and opera—which led to discussions (the noblemen didn't really "work" in the 18th century, did they? how was Manon to exist? etc.) By the time we got to the opera *Manon*, we could compare this opera with other operas viz., *Carmen* and *Louise*. We could compare the fathers of Des Grieux and Louise, the street scenes of Paris in *Louise* and *Manon*.

Only for the final exam did the students not have a "take-home" exam; they listened to excerpts from Manon, for which they had to identify which character was singing, at what moment, and what was going on. It was a good occasion to compare the various operas they had heard and studied throughout the semester.

When the class begin, no student had ever been to an opera. Only two students had ever heard (or heard of!) Carmen. There was some apprehension that operas were "high brow." The students found the operas enjoyable—and compared these operas with "The Miz" (*Les Misérables*). It was almost a bit like Monsieur Jourdain (of Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*) who realized that what was thought to be high brow or esoteric, was really quite understandable, enjoyable, and not as "far out" or unapproachable as previously imagined. A liberal education must include not just what is useful for employment (such as perhaps business French) but an appreciation of music and art, too.

Other French operas which could be used in class might be *Samson et Dalilah* by Camille Saint-Saëns (for which the video is available), Gounod's *Faust* or perhaps *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, music by Ravel, words by Colette. The video version of Rossini's *Le Barbier de Seville* (sung in French) is available and would be nice to study together with Beaumarchais' play; however the video is "vintage" black and white and not easy to understand.

Discussion and Conclusion

Whereas most classes of French culture and/or civilization include passing reference to French operatic music and art, it has been shown that an entire course can be offered which is primarily a study of French operas and paintings, with literature, history, civilization, and grammar included as needed.[3]

We started with the most modern opera and worked our way back chronologically. We so-to-speak "plunged in" with *La Voix humaine*, the shortest of the operas studied, which can easily

be studied in one or two class periods. The opening bars are so dramatic and emotional that every student is immediately engulfed in the tense setting. This was followed by the comic opera *L'Heure espagnole*, for which a video was available. The two operas for which the short story (*Carmen*) and novel (*Manon Lescaut*) were to be read came later in the course, so that students would have time to read those texts before starting the corresponding operas. The more famous French nineteenth-century operas were studied at the end, concluding a panoramic view of a musical tradition.

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Endnotes

1. P.O. Box 158067, Nashville, TN 37215-9067, or call toll-free (800) 824-0829.

2. As told to Gustave Samazaeuilh, quoted in the Libretto of the EPIC recording, Paris Opéra-Comique, Jean Fournet, conductor.

3. The class offered was of French music and art. The study of art was based on the text *Un Tableau, un enfant, un peintre, une histoire* by Eska Kayser and Jacqueline Marquet. [Editions Fleurus 11, rue Duguay Trouin 75006 Paris ISBN 2.215.01097.5, available at the Louvre Museum book store in Paris] Most of the art works included in that book are from the Louvre or the Musée du Quai d'Orsay. This book, intended for French young people, was not difficult for our students who had completed at least three years of college French. The famous paintings, often of children, are analyzed in some technical detail; there is a brief description of the life of the artist; and a bit of quite fascinating history of the period is included for each picture. Thus culture and civilization are used as **adjuncts** to the primary study of paintings.